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ABSTRACT

This document offers three articles reporting research and practice on the use of paraeducators to provide support to students with disabilities and their teachers. Emphasis is on research funded by the Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs. The first article notes the increasing use of paraeducators to provide instructional support for students with disabilities. The second article offers examples of improved paraprofessional practices through mindful planning, supervision, and professional development. Examples illustrate use of a planning tool to address need, assessment of paraeducator roles and activities, paraprofessional training, and training teachers to conduct paraprofessional development sessions. In addition, five organizational resources are highlighted. The final article provides examples of how states are ensuring the preparation of paraeducators. These include: (1) competency determination (Minnesota); (2) paraeducator certification standards (Iowa); (3) a statewide training effort (Hawaii); (4) and an infrastructure to support paraeducator standards (Rhode Island). (DB)

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Research Connections in Special Education

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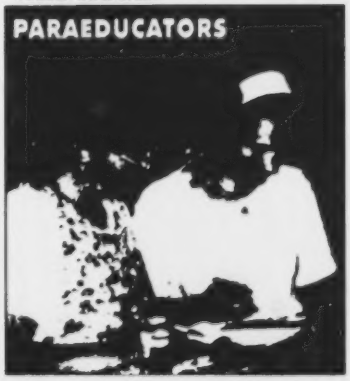
RESEARCH Connections in Special Education

NUMBER 12 SPRING 2003

Paraeducators

Providing Support to Students with Disabilities and Their Teachers

THIS ISSUE:



THE OFFICE OF SPECIAL EDUCATION PROGRAMS (OSEP) HAS A LONG HISTORY OF SUPPORTING RESEARCH THAT ADDRESSES ISSUES RELATED TO PARAEDUCATORS. THIS *RESEARCH CONNECTIONS* TAKES A LOOK AT CURRENT FINDINGS.

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Increasingly, paraeducators* are providing instructional and learner support to students with disabilities—a major shift from 40 years ago when their responsibilities were primarily clerical. Today's paraeducators still perform routine clerical and housekeeping tasks. However, there is a greater emphasis on their instructional and learner support roles. The OSEP-funded Study of Personnel Needs in Special Education (SPeNSE) found that the majority of paraeducators who work in special education typically spend 85 to 90 percent of their time participating in instructional activities, including tutoring individuals and groups of learners under the direction of a licensed practitioner, gathering data, implementing behavior management plans, preparing materials, and meeting with teachers. They also monitor hallways, playgrounds, and lunchrooms, as well as provide clerical support.

"The quality of instruction and service has a tremendous effect on student achievement," points out **Elaine Carlson**, director of SPeNSE. "The knowledge and skills of everyone who works with students with disabilities—including paraeducators—are central to ensuring a quality workforce."

To ensure a quality workforce, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) has provisions that allow paraprofessionals who are appropriately trained and supervised to assist in the provision of special education and related services to children with disabilities. State education agencies must provide leadership to ensure that paraeducators are appropriately prepared.

The evolving roles and responsibilities of paraeducators makes this a challenging task. "Increased reliance on paraeducators with greater emphasis on their instructional and learner support roles requires a serious look at their roles, supervision, and preparation," says **Anna Lou Pickett**, consultant and past executive director of the National Resource Center for Paraprofessionals. "Policies and systems are needed that reflect these changes in both teacher and paraeducator roles."

As teachers increasingly rely on paraeducators to provide instructional support for students with disabilities, issues related to their roles and responsibilities must be addressed. Researchers featured in this ***Research Connections*** are helping us better understand how paraeducators' work may be enhanced to ensure that students with disabilities achieve to high standards.

[*The terms *paraprofessional* and *paraeducator* are used interchangeably.]

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WHAT WE'VE LEARNED

Improving Paraeducator Practices

With OSEP support, researchers are investigating how best to support paraeducator performance. The following examples show that mindful planning, supervision, and professional development can result in improved practices.

Under the supervision of licensed teachers, paraeducators provide essential instructional support to students.

IMPROVING PARAEDUCATOR SUPPORTS SCHOOLWIDE

"Substantial benefits can accrue for students and teachers when well conceived paraeducator supports are implemented," says University of Vermont researcher Michael Giangreco. "However, these benefits require a balance between supports offered by paraprofessionals and those offered by teachers, peers, and others."

For more than a decade, Giangreco and his colleagues have been studying ways to improve paraeducator supports for students with disabilities. To do this, Giangreco suggests pursuing role clarification and role alignment with paraprofessional skills, orientation, training, and supervision. But, he adds, educators also should do a better job in determining when paraprofessional supports are warranted and appropriate. "Neither research nor common sense supports assigning paraeducators to provide primary or exclusive instruction to students with disabilities," asserts Giangreco. "Educators should be very careful not to create a double standard whereby students with disabilities receive their instruction from paraprofessionals, while students without disabilities have ongoing access to qualified professional educators." [For a full discussion of these issues, visit one of Giangreco's web sites for his OSEP-funded Project EVOLVE at http://www.uvm.edu/~cdci/evolve/.]

To support educators in ensuring that paraeducators are used appropriately, Giangreco and his colleagues—with OSEP support—developed *A Guide to Schoolwide Planning for Paraeducator Supports* (at http://www.uvm.edu/~cdci/parasupport). This 10-step action planning process assists school-based teams in assessing [see sidebar, "Planning Process"] their own status in terms of paraprofessional supports. The planning process was successfully field-tested in 50 schools across 13 states. Findings indicate that the planning process can assist schools to self-assess their paraeducator practices, identify priorities in need of improvement, develop action plans, and implement them.

PLANNING PROCESS

1. Inform local school board of intentions to form a team.
2. Select team members.
3. Assess own status and fact-find in relation to paraeducator topics.
4. Prioritize and select topics to work on.
5. Update school board of team progress.
6. Design a plan to address priorities.
7. Identify resources.
8. Implement plan.
9. Evaluate plan and chart next steps.
10. Report impact and needs to school community.

"Joining forces with all parties to take positive steps schoolwide can result in actions that are more effective, strategic, and sustainable," Giangreco explains.

Educators Use Planning Tool to Address Needs

In Colorado, Challenger Middle School teacher Jami Finn is the first to tell you that she was not satisfied during the first year she had paraeducators working in her room. "I never had training in how to supervise paraeducators and I was unsure about their

roles and responsibilities," Finn reports. "The planning tool developed by Dr. Giangreco and colleagues was attractive because it offered a way for our team to discuss issues of concern, prioritize what we wanted to address, and take practical steps to improve our practices."

Finn convened a team consisting of herself (a significant support needs teacher), a resource teacher, paraeducators, a general education teacher, an administrator, and a parent. During a three month period, team members met bimonthly to craft an action plan.

"Paraeducators were very concerned about structural issues, such as hiring practices, job descriptions, and training," Finn points out. "They also were concerned with their roles and responsibilities when accompanying students to general classrooms, citing a general awkwardness in knowing what to do."

As a result of the planning process, Finn says the team identified a number of strategies to address the concerns, including a paraeducator handbook and a web site that provides useful information and resources. Topics on the web site include the following:

- Roles and responsibilities.
- Classroom organization and behavior management issues.
- Medical and safety issues.
- Orientation to the program philosophy and goals.
- Ethical issues.
- Curriculum goals.

"We also created a section that we use to orient new parents to our program," Finn adds.

ASSESSING PARAEDUCATOR ROLES AND ACTIVITIES

"Relatively little empirical research exists on the efficacy of the use of paraeducators, recommended practices used by paraeducators, or validated practices for classrooms staffed by a paraeducator and a teacher," explains **Margaret Werts**, researcher at Appalachian State University. "Our research took one variable—proximity of an assigned paraeducator to a student in an inclusive classroom—and sought to find out if it had an impact on the academic engagement of students with significant disabilities."

In the OSEP-supported work, Werts and her colleagues found that proximity of the paraeducator has a positive impact on academic engagement of elementary-aged students. Findings suggested that:

- Students were more academically engaged when their paraprofessionals were in close proximity.
- Interactions between the student and paraeducator occurred when the paraeducator was close to the student.

RESOURCE

NATIONAL RESOURCE CENTER FOR PARAPROFESSIONALS (NRCP)

Policy makers do not need to start from scratch in addressing issues related to paraeducator standards. With OSEP support, NRCP has developed guidelines for paraeducator roles and responsibilities as well as model standards for their training and supervision, in the publication, *Strengthening and Supporting Teacher/Provider-Paraeducator Teams: Guidelines for Paraeducators Roles, Supervision, and Preparation.*

The mission of the NRCP is to address policy questions and other needs of the field, provide technical assistance and share information about policy questions, management practices, regulatory procedures, and training models that will enable administrators and staff developers to improve the recruitment, deployment, supervision, and career development of paraeducators. Check out the web site at **www.nrcpara.org**.

RESOURCE

PARAPROFESSIONAL INITIATIVE: REPORT TO OSEP

In 1999, the OSEP-funded Associations of Service Providers Implementing IDEA Reforms in Education Partnership Project (ASPIIRE) launched the Paraprofessional Initiative. Its goal: To develop consensus on the definition of paraprofessionals and assistants that acknowledge the supervisory roles of licensed or certified professional staff and on the critical need for paraprofessionals to be appropriately trained.

Leslie Jackson of the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) chaired the work group. "Because IDEA does not define paraprofessional, group members felt it was important to provide a working definition," Jackson said. The resulting definition, which applies to paraeducators and technically educated assistants, follows:

> *The paraprofessional is an employee who, following appropriate training, performs tasks as prescribed and supervised by the licensed/certified professional/practitioner. Paraprofessionals perform specific duties as directed by the licensed/certified professional/practitioner. The licensed/certified professional/practitioner maintains responsibility for assessing the learner and family needs, and for planning, evaluating, and modifying programs.*

In defining paraprofessionals, Jackson stressed the importance of keeping their roles and responsibilities in perspective. "Paraeducators are not intended to supplant or replace teachers or related service professionals; they are there to assist as determined by the professional," Jackson points out. "Paraeducators *add* an important element to the delivery of services and instruction."

The report is available on the ASPIIRE/ILIAD web site at **www.ideapractices.org**. For more information on occupational therapy assistants, AOTA has a fax-on-demand service for documents on the topic at 800-701-7735. Request documents 926 (on roles and responsibilities) and 927 (on supervision).

continued on page 4

Improving Paraeducator Practices (continued)

Verbal interactions between students and paraeducators were prevalent when academic engagement was high.

- When the paraeducator moved back two feet or more, academic on-task behavior dropped.

"From this study, we began looking at proximity in terms of whether roles were different for paraeducators who were assigned to work one-on-one with students with disabilities and those who were assigned to work with the general classroom," Werts tells us. "Findings suggested that one-on-one paraeducators spend more time in close proximity with students—for example, more than 50 percent of the time, one-on-one paraeducators were less than two feet from students, compared to only 25 percent for general education paraeducators. Moreover, general education paraeducators were found to be more than five feet away from students with disabilities twice as much of the time as the one-on-one paraeducators."

The findings raise issues about academic engagement and other student outcomes, and the assignment of paraeducators to individual students or to classes. "To maximize the amount and nature of interaction when academic engagement is the desired outcome, we began designing instructional and interactive strategies using proximity of the paraeducator," Werts describes. These strategies were built into a course for paraeducators.

According to **Christina Tillery**, who completed Werts' training while a paraeducator in the Watauga Schools in North Carolina, the training helped make her more conscious of what she was doing and how it was affecting children. "Dr. Werts and her staff observed me in the classroom. Afterwards, they took the proximity data they collected on my physical, verbal, and non-verbal interactions and created a graph," Tillery explains. Werts shared the data with Tillery during a consultation. "I thought I spent all of my time managing behavior," Tillery remarked. "But the data showed me how much I really was doing to support the academic progress of children."

Werts also shared Tillery's graphs with the parents of the children. "This really helped put everyone on the same page in terms of helping the child," Tillery points out. "I also had access to the aggregated data of other paraeducators, which helped me reflect on how I was doing in relation to others."

PROVIDING TRAINING

For more than a decade, University of Colorado-Denver researcher **Nancy French** has been at the center of efforts to prepare paraeducators for instructional and learner support roles. Her research consistently has shown a need for training in tasks that many paraeducators are currently performing.

"In spite of the dramatic shift in the paraeducator role away from clerical work and toward instructional support, training remains notably absent," French comments. She notes a number of issues that make training challenging:

- The development of paraeducator programs in many community colleges has progressed slowly and in isolation. Most programs have had difficulty recruiting students, except in cases where local districts have agreed to give hiring preference to trained personnel.
- School districts face difficult decisions about lack of training time and limited training budgets.
- The mostly nonexistent career development structures in many districts limit the willingness of paraeducators to participate in training.

RESOURCE

National Clearinghouse for Professions in Special Education

"Today's paraeducators are present in most educational settings—they may be found in a prekindergarten class for children with special needs, out in the community serving as a job coach for a student with developmental disabilities, in a resource room for adolescents with learning disabilities, or in a fourth grade classroom that contains students both with and without special needs," points out **Lynn Boyer**, Director of the National Clearinghouse for Professions in Special Education (NCPSE), an OSEP-funded project at the Council for Exceptional Children. "They have skills and contributions that make them highly valued and sought after in education."

The NCPSE web site [**www.special-ed-careers.org**] provides a wealth of information on careers in special education, including that of paraeducator. Of particular interest are the topics included on the paraeducator profile page:

- Nature of the work.
- Education required.
- Personal qualities.
- Job outlook and advancement.
- How to prepare for a career.
- Resources.

Also provided is a link to the Council for Exceptional Children's set of Knowledge and Skills for Paraeducators that are being used by paraeducator training programs nationwide.

"There is no shortage of good curricula for preparing paraeducators," says French. "However, we must provide incentives to applicants who come with preservice training and to employees who gain additional skills and competencies through inservice training."

French also notes a need for training special education teachers in supervisory techniques. In a study of teacher practices related to supervising para-

RESOURCE

A Family Perspective

"Parents find that their child's success often depends upon the decisions administrators and teachers make about the paraeducators they supervise," says **Paula Goldberg**, Executive Director of the PACER Center, a parent training and information center that directs several OSEP-funded projects. PACER asked a group of parents to identify issues that they would ask school districts to consider in using a paraeducator to help their child.

- **Training**: Parents recommend providing paraeducators with information on the child's disability; techniques for positive behavior intervention, communication, and health issues; communication strategies for interacting with parents; and approaches that encourage independence for the child.
- **Understanding roles and responsibilities**: Parents want the IEP team to determine the paraeducator's roles and responsibilities. The IEP should specify that the paraeducator supports the teacher who is the child's primary instructor.
- **Encouraging parent input**. Parents believe they should participate in setting criteria for the assignment of a paraeducator to their child.
- **Including the paraeducator on the child's team**. Parents want paraeducators to be accepted as part of the school community and to be respected and valued for their contributions to the child's educational team.

For more information, visit the PACER web site at **www.pacer.org**.

educators, French found that on-the-job experience was the primary source of their supervisory knowledge. "To perform supervisory roles effectively, teachers need communication and interview techniques, planning methods, meeting facilitation skills, strategies for providing on-the-job training, an understanding of role distinctions, and task delegation skills."

Training Teachers To Conduct Paraeducator Professional Development Sessions

With OSEP support, French developed the CO-TOP model for training teachers and other school professionals to supervise and provide professional development to paraeducators.

Don Bell, a significant support needs specialist in Douglas County Colorado Schools, completed French's trainer of trainers course. Part of his work in the district involves coordinating paraeducator trainings, in which he uses French's materials. "Initially we ran district trainings for paraeducators. Eventually the district staff development office got involved," Bell reports. "Currently, we have twelve active trainers in the district, four of whom are paraeducators."

Bell points out that the district has offered several incentives to paraeducators. "The district allows paraeducators to qualify for reimbursement and stipends for completed training. Paraeducator trainings also are offered on regularly scheduled inservice days, and at other times that are preferred by paraeducators." Bell offered the following tips:

- Focus on issues that are important to the paraeducators.
- Personalize the curriculum (e.g., use district forms).
- Use good trainers.
- Provide an orientation to all new hires.
- Make sure teachers are apprised of paraeducator training content.

Samuel Palmer and **Kathy Sweezy**, teachers at the Eastern Suffolk New York BOCES, also completed French's training. In addition to using French's curriculum content in the context of supervising paraeducators in their own classrooms, Palmer and Sweezy developed and teach a course on paraeducators for teachers at SUNY-Stoneybrook.

"Most teachers do not have experience setting up their classrooms to work as a team with paraeducators," Palmer points out. "They need a range of skills from instructing paraeducators in how to use materials, to making written daily plans, to delegating responsibilities." Sweezy adds, "We emphasize that working as a team means everybody is on the same page."

RESOURCE

Education and Training Voluntary Partnership

What do paraeducators need to know and be able to do? According to **Tish Olshefski** of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), "Answers to those questions will further the profession by ensuring that individuals can do these jobs."

Olshefski hopes that as a result of the Education and Training Voluntary Partnership project at AFT—a coalition of organizations and individuals with an interest in skills standards for the education workforce—we will have a better understanding of what it means to do the work of a paraeducator well. Funded by the Department of Labor, the project is developing a national, voluntary system of skill standards for frontline workers in education. "We expect that the standards will be used for a variety of purposes, such as aligning training programs, developing certificate programs, writing job descriptions, and doing job evaluations," says Olshefski.

The research process involves frontline workers and subject matter experts and includes the use of intensive focus groups and validation through a national survey. The standards are due to be released sometime in 2003.

For more information, visit the project web site at **www.etvp.org**.

VIEWS FROM THE STATES

Ensuring a High Quality Workforce

IDEA called upon states to ensure a high quality paraeducator workforce. Spurred in part by IDEA, and now the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB), states are focusing more attention on the skills and knowledge of paraeducators. Following are examples of how states are taking the initiative to ensure that paraeducators are well prepared.

DETERMINING COMPETENCIES IN MINNESOTA

IDEA requires that paraeducators be supervised. In creating supervisory systems, what should states and local districts consider?

"When teachers and administrators understand what is necessary to prepare and support paraeducators, their efforts will ultimately contribute to better instruction, a stronger team atmosphere, and increased confidence and job satisfaction among paraeducators," reports **Teri Wallace**, researcher at the University of Minnesota. "Teachers must learn strategies for directing the work of paraeducators and administrators must promote effective instructional supervisory relationships and create infrastructures that reward teacher-paraeducator teams.

To determine supervision competencies, Wallace conducted a statewide study. She found competencies were required in the following areas:

- Communicating with paraeducators.
- Managing the work of paraeducators.
- Modeling for paraeducators.
- Planning and scheduling.
- Providing instructional support.
- Carrying out public relations on behalf of paraeducators.
- Training paraeducators.

For almost a decade, Wallace also has been conducting tri-annual statewide needs assessments of paraeducators. "Recognizing paraeducators' training, responsibilities, experience, and skill levels, increases the probability that they will be placed in positions for which they are qualified, and which effectively and efficiently use their skills to enhance the quality of services for students. Data from these needs assessments help to uncover real issues and concerns."

In addition to conducting research, Wallace has contributed to many paraprofessional initiatives in Minnesota—including the Para eLink (online training for paraprofessionals), and ParaLink newsletter for paraprofessionals supported by the Minnesota Statewide Paraprofessional Consortium. Check out the Consortium's web site at **http://ici2.umn.edu/para/**.

IOWA ESTABLISHES CERTIFICATION

Recognizing the increasingly important support roles paraeducators perform, stakeholders in Iowa decided to tackle status and training issues. The result: A state law that created a paraeducator voluntary certification system.

"Paraeducators want to do the best job possible with the children they serve and are interested in learning effective techniques and strategies," explains **Susan Simon**, professor at Kirkwood Community College (KCC) in Cedar Rapids. "Now, paraeducators can receive specific, focused training in their local communities, and be acknowledged for their education by the state. Some school districts are providing additional salary for paraeducators who complete their certification."

Paraeducator training programs are approved by the state. Certification requirements specify competencies for:

Level 1-Generalist: Training includes 90 clock hours on topics such as behavior management, exceptional child and at-risk child behavior, collaboration and interpersonal skills, child and youth

NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND ACT (NCLB)

In 2002, the U.S. Department of Education (ED) released regulations for the NCLB Act and non-regulatory guidance on paraprofessionals working in programs supported by Title I funds. With regard to paraprofessionals working with students with disabilities, federal requirements differ depending on the situation. [*Note*: States may have additional requirements.] NCLB requirements pertain to paraprofessionals who are:

- Working in a Title I targeted assistance program, have instructional support duties, and are paid with Title I funds.
- Working in a Title I schoolwide program school and have instructional support duties, without regard to the source of funding that supports that position.

NCLB requirements do not pertain to paraprofessionals who do not provide instructional support. For more information on NCLB, visit the ED web site at: **http://www.ed.gov/offices/OESE/SASA/paraprofessional.html**.

development, technology, and ethical responsibilities and behavior.

Level 2-Areas of Concentration: Participants who hold a Level 1 Generalist Certificate may complete an additional 45 hours of study in one of the following concentration areas: special education, early childhood, limited English proficiency, or career and transition.

Level 2-Advanced: Candidates also must hold an associate degree or have earned 62 hours at an institution of higher education. To complete the certificate, candidates also must successfully complete 100 clock hours of supervised practicum with children.

With OSEP support, Simon has created a project at KCC designed to increase the quality and quantity of paraeducators. "We try to accommodate paraeducators' schedules by offering courses at various times and via different mediums, such as distance learning," Simon tells us. "Also, we have made it possible for certification courses to lead to an associate degree." Currently, the KCC model is being replicated in six other community colleges. For more information, contact Simon at **ssimon@kirkwood.cc.ia.us**.

HAWAII LAUNCHES STATEWIDE TRAINING EFFORT

How do you plan and deliver training statewide for more than 3,500 paraeducators? This was the challenge facing Hawaii as officials set out to meet state, IDEA, and NCLB requirements.

Dale Asami of the Hawaii Department of Education explains that since 1999 that state has offered voluntary training. "The training is free. However, paraeducators may opt to register for college credit," says Asami. "The college credit can be applied toward a certificate and/or be used to meet career ladder requirements." The training is organized by levels:

- **Level 1:** The one-day orientation training introduces participants to paraeducator roles and responsibilities. The training is open to paraeducators, as well as parents, volunteers, and other interested individuals.
- **Level 2:** Paraeducators participate in weekly 4-hour sessions for a total of 72 hours. Topics include roles and responsibilities, communication skills, behavioral management, instructional practices, and organizational issues. A practicum component provides an opportunity for resource professionals to observe and assess paraeducators in their school settings.
- **Level 3:** This advanced training provides more in-depth study in addition to formal practicum observations.

"The practicum observation component adds an important element of accountability," states Asami. "The observation tool uses rubrics that are unique to paraeducators' roles and responsibilities in such areas as instruction, collaboration, and behavioral management." For more information, contact Asami at **dale_asami@notes.k12.hi.us**.

RHODE ISLAND DEVELOPS AN INFRASTRUCTURE

"Rhode Island is committed to ensuring that children achieve to high standards, and thus, we need personnel who demonstrate high standards," asserts **Peggy Hayden**, who serves as a consultant to the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE). "Since the mid 1990s, RIDE—with the joint commitment of resources of the RIDE Office of Special Needs and the Office of Teacher Preparation, Certification and Professional Development—has established an infrastructure to support paraeducator standards implementation."

In 1998, RIDE established paraeducator standards that specify paraeducator competencies as a result of an approved training program. To be RIDE approved, a program submits an application demonstrating how it will meet standards. Currently, approximately 30 programs have been approved. A typical training program is 27 hours over multiple weeks, with most involving classes, practica, and the development of portfolios.

To support state standards, RIDE has used financial resources in a strategic way, establishing:

- Regional paraeducator networks.
- A quarterly newsletter.
- Professional development materials that are loaned.
- State sponsored trainings.
- Web site resources at **www.ridoe.net** and **www.ritap.org**.

Rhode Island is addressing the new NCLB requirements for paraeducators by building on their current foundation. "RIDE is applying the IDEA requirement that personnel serving students with disabilities meet the highest standard in the state applicable to that job type," Hayden explains. "Thus, the NCLB requirements are applicable to all paraeducators working in an instructional capacity with students with disabilities regardless of funding source." RIDE is recommending that NCLB requirements apply to all instructional paraeducators, setting a uniform standard.

For more information, contact Peggy Hayden at **peggy_hayden@ids.net**.

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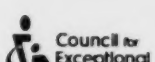

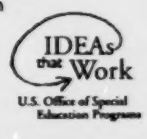

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